

# 'Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them' – Soteriology in 1 John

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The author of 1 John states that *'those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them'*. This is found explicitly four times (3:5; 3:6 bis; 3:9; 5:18), and implicitly once (2:29). The author links these assertions to the life of Jesus (1 Jn 3:5). Anyone reading these texts is likely to find them hard to bear, because the author appears to be discussing a doctrine of Christian perfection. However, in this research I shall attempt to show (using a socio-rhetorical approach) that, in fact, these assertions should not be interpreted literally by the reader. Instead, these texts are part of the author's rhetorical construction to designate just how radical he sees the salvation event. The author substantiates the understanding and meaning of these radical assertions in his depiction of Christian existence as existence in a family, the *familia Dei*.

## Introduction

The content of (the books of) the New Testament (NT) revolves around salvation or the implications of salvation. The other side of the coin is obviously 'sin'. If there was no sin, salvation would not have been necessary. The early church wrestled with the phenomenon of 'sin'. What is 'sin'? When do people sin? When you sin, do you still remain a 'child of God'? The author of the First Epistle of John (hereafter 'The Elder') gives his explanation of addressing this problem in the early church at the end of the first century CE. This short letter, which consists of only five short chapters, is probably the book in the New Testament that most extensively elaborates on 'sin', in its use of the verb ἁμαρτάνειν in a generic sense and in its reference to other forms of transgressions. In contrast to sin, the Elder tries to expound his understanding of what salvation comprises.

In his explication, the Elder makes the following controversial assertions<sup>1</sup> regarding 'sin' and 'salvation':

- (3:5) ..... ἁμαρτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν (J)<sup>2</sup>  
 (3:6) ..... πᾶς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων ..... οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει (CG)  
 (3:9) ..... Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν ..... οὐ ποιεῖ, (CG)  
 (3:9) ... καὶ οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν, ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται (CG)  
 (5:18) Οἶδαμεν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει (CG)  
 (2:29) πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην ἐξ αὐτοῦ γεγέννηται (CG)

These statements appear hard indeed, because it seems as if we are dealing with a doctrine of perfectionism. 1 John 3:5 is understandable because Jesus is the 'only Son' who came from the Father who sent him. The other statements (3:6, 9; 5:18) are pregnant articulations by the Elder of divine involvement and enablement of the Christian life, between conversion and the eschaton. These statements create the impression that the Elder is trying to compare the status of the children of God with that of the Son of God. The questions that emerge directly are: what is really meant by these statements regarding 'sinlessness'? How are we to interpret them? What did the Elder have in mind when he wrote them? Must we interpret these statements literally? What implications do they have for soteriology? Does the status of a child of God really relate to the status of the Son of God?

This research will investigate the intension of the Elder in his assertions concerning 'sinlessness' and the implications of these assertions for the church until the time of the *parousia* (2:28–3:3; 4:17). In this article, I will point out how these controversial and radical statements about 'sinlessness' must be understood from various perspectives. This investigation will be conducted from a socio-rhetorical perspective.<sup>3</sup>

1. Only found in 1 John.

2. The (J) refers to Jesus and the (CG) refers to 'the children of God'.

3. The research will start with an investigation of the socio-historical circumstances of the community, then the ideology of the Elder, the literary exploration of the radical statements about 'sinlessness', sin and forgiveness in the family, and finally it will conclude by examining the issue from an eschatological perspective.

## Socio-historical circumstances

### The socio-historical situation in the community - problems with opponents

The First Epistle of John depicts a community torn apart by doctrinal and ethical differences. Indeed, these differences had caused a schism in the community by the time the Elder wrote 1 John (cf. Culpepper 1998:48). The identity and numbers of the deceivers and the circumstances in the community is still the cause of considerable debate.<sup>4</sup>

The first helpful starting point for identifying the Elder's opponents, that is, those who caused the schism, is found in 1 John 2:18–19. These verses indicate that, previously, these opponents had not been differentiated from the adherents of the Elder. Key texts that facilitate the identification of the opponents are: 2:18, 22 (ἀντίχριστος, ψεύστης); 2:26 (πλανώντων); and 4:1 (ψευδοπροφήται). These texts create the impression that the Elder is concerned about his adherents not being deceived any further. The deception was already a reality, and had already caused a rift in the community (Kenney 2000:101). The present tense use of the verb πλανώντων [deceive] is significant here in that it emphasises the ongoing or immediate nature of the deception (Danker 2000:821).

The Elder repudiates the position of his opponents with statements that explain his own position and that of his opponents. The statements relate to, claims regarding their status, statements about various ethical considerations, and statements about the identity of Jesus (Von Wahlde 1990:108). It seems that the Elder's opponents claimed a special illumination by the Spirit (2:20, 27) that imparted to them the true knowledge of God and that caused them to regard themselves as *the* children of God. In fact, it is as if they were sufficiently persuaded of the superiority of their inspiration to remove themselves from the circle of Johannine Christianity (Hurtado 2003:424). This explains the strong emphasis by the Elder on the knowledge of God and how he and his adherents became children of God (to receive salvation, 5:1–5). He contrasts their claim to knowledge with the knowledge that can come only from the Christian tradition (2:24), and nowhere else.

As a result of this spiritual illumination, these heretics claimed to have attained a state beyond ordinary Christian morality, a state of sinlessness and moral perfection (1:8–10) (Hurtado 2003:416; Painter 2002:227; Van der Merwe 2005:441f).<sup>5</sup> They appear to have believed that a new and superior insight had been given to them. This group taught that all believers

had been delivered from sin and had already crossed over from death into life (1 Jn 1:8, 10; 3:14). This strong emphasis on realised eschatology led to a disregard for the need to continue to resist sin. The Elder warns his readers against claiming to be without sin (1 Jn 1:8–2:2).

This perception influenced their perception of Jesus and advocated a 'higher' Christology that emphasised the divinity of Christ whilst minimising the humanity of Jesus (1 Jn 2:19; 4:2) (Brown 1982:52; Kenny 2000:101; Lieu 1986:207). The same group of people denied the incarnation (2:22; 4:1). Because of their belief that matter was *ipso facto* evil, God could not possibly have come into direct contact with the phenomenal world through Christ. They, therefore, denied the incarnation in general terms. They went even further by denying the reality of Jesus's suffering. There is also a series of statements that indicate a serious disagreement about the person of Jesus Christ (1 Jn 2:22; 4:2, 3, 15; 5:1, 5, 6, 10, 13; cf. also 2 Jn 7). Taken together, these statements yield a list of what the Elder urges his readers to believe and confess that Jesus is 'the Messiah' (2:22; 5:1; cf. 3:23; 4:2; 5:6, 20), that he has 'come in the flesh' (4:2; cf. 2 Jn 7), that he is 'the Son of God' (3:8; 4:15; 5:5, 10, 12, 13), and that he came by 'water and blood'. *In other words, they must 'believe in' Jesus (3:23; 5:1, 5, 10, 13, 20) and 'confess' (2:22, 23) him. Such a confession has implications for the forgiveness of sin, salvation, and their conduct.*

### Conclusion

It is evident that opposite groups exist in the same environment. The one group, according to the Elder, experiences fellowship with God, whilst the other group(s) do not, owing to their perception of both 'sin' and Jesus. The above hypothetical discussion, of the possible socio-historical circumstances, constructs the historical and theological contours in which the 'sinless' expressions of the Elder must be understood. On the one hand, it seems to be a *refutation* and, on the other, an *exhortation*.

### Ideology of the elder

One of the two major themes<sup>6</sup> of the First Epistle of John is fellowship (Van der Merwe 2006:535–563). This was a reaction on the part of the Elder against his opponents, who claimed fellowship with God without confessing Jesus to be the Christ, and who also proclaimed a status of perfectionism.<sup>7</sup> The Elder wants his readers to have assurance of the indwelling of God through their abiding relationship with Him, through his Son Jesus Christ (2:28; 5:13). He has, therefore, written this epistle to encourage this kind of fellowship.

4. Many attempts have been made to identify the deceivers in 1 John. Unfortunately, none of these identifications are convincing. We can therefore agree with Edwards, (2000:161; see also Du Plessis 1978:101) that we cannot negate the existence of 'opponents' or 'deceivers', but that the precise historical situation cannot be reliably reconstructed. However, from the text it is possible to make some deductions concerning how their beliefs influenced the polemic-pastoral message of the Elder. See also Van der Merwe (2009:231–261).

5. When the Elder refers to the sinlessness of Jesus (3:5), he uses the singular (ἁμαρτία). The claim of the opponents to have no sin is also singular (1:8). Their claim to be sinless may have developed from the teaching of the sinlessness of Jesus. They probably claimed for themselves what the Elder teaches about Jesus (Painter 2002:227).

6. For Georg Strecker and Friedrich W. Horn (2000:440) 'fellowship with God' represents a central element of the theology of 1 John. Within scholarship two distinct and disparate views have developed concerning the message of 1 John. These views have arisen as a consequence of two variant perceptions of the purpose of the epistle. The one comprises 'salvation' (5:13, Ταῦτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν ἵνα σιῶτε ὅτι ζωὴν ἔχετε αἰώνιον) and the other 'fellowship' (1:3, κοινωνίαν [see also Derickson 1993:89–105]). In fact, the two views complement one another. Both these themes are mentioned in the prologue of 1 John, where the author gives, as we may expect, a synopsis of his principal motifs. In this essay the emphasis falls on the 'fellowship' perspective.

7. Perfectionism in the Christian religion was never promoted by the Elder. This is evident from his acknowledgement and teaching of 'if one should sin' in 1:7–9.

The richly significant theological noun, *κοινωνία* (fellowship), occurs twice in the *prooemium* (1:3) and two more times in the rest of chapter one (1:6f), to create a chiastic pattern in order to draw the reader's attention to this way of living, which the Elder further develops in the rest of the Epistle. Lexicographically *κοινωνία* means, according to Danker (2000:552), 'close association involving mutual interests and sharing, *association, communion, fellowship, close relationship*'. The semantic meaning, according to Louw and Nida (1988:446), relates to Danker's definition, that is 'an association involving close mutual relations and involvement – "close association, fellowship"'.<sup>8</sup>

On the basis of the above related definitions, and on the basis of the adjective meaning 'common' (*κοινός*),<sup>8</sup> the noun *κοινωνία* then denotes the active participation, or sharing in, what one has in common with others, namely, doing something together or sharing something (Haas, De Jonge & Swellengrebel 1972:27). The nature of what is mutually shared moulds the character of the group. In this context it refers to 'the life' that believers share with Christ and with one another. This new life in Christ creates and stimulates the desire for such fellowship and calls for active participation with other believers in this new life.

In the first part of the *ἵνα*-clause (*ὅμοις κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ' ἡμῶν*), the Elder speaks of fellowship amongst Christians, which is a sharing which exists on the human level, even if it derives from a mutual indwelling in Christ. In the extended part of the *ἵνα*-clause (*καὶνήκοινωνία δὲ ἡ ἡμετέρα μετὰ ...*), *yearning to encourage and advance this Christian fellowship*, the Elder describes the nature of Christian fellowship in terms of its divine origin (cf. born of God – 2:29; 3:9) and operation, 'and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ' (*καὶ ἡ κοινωνία δὲ ἡ ἡμετέρα μετὰ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ μετὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ* Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, 1:3). This vertical fellowship is essential for true horizontal fellowship. The Elder makes the primary reference of 'we have fellowship with one another' (*κοινωνία ἔχομεν μετ' ἀλλήλων*, 1:7) and this is dependent on 'you may have fellowship with us' (*κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ' ἡμῶν*, 1:3; also cf. 4:20), which opens up *κοινωνία* with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ (Painter 2002:128; Rusam 1993:182; Westcott 1982:11). Both these aspects reflect, influence and constitute the other. Both these relationships are theologically '*vergleichbar*', and both earn the qualification *κοινωνίας* (Rusam 1993:105). In this instance, the noun *κοινωνία* is used in a familial (metaphoric) sense. This *κοινωνία* is, thus, possible only between Father, Son and children (cf. 1:3, 6) and *can only be created in a 'sinless' environment, because both the Father and the Son are 'righteous'*. Whilst 'sin' constitutes separation, 'fellowship' binds together. The two are mutual opposites. Part of the Elder's

rhetoric to enhance this fellowship was to state that a person who has been born of God does not or cannot sin.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

In order to enhance this fellowship, the Elder explicitly states that those who are born of God cannot sin. With the historical background and the Elder's ideology of *κοινωνία* in mind, historical and theological environments are created in which meaning for these statements are generated. The literary meaning of these (sinless) statements will now be investigated.

## A literary exploration of the statement: 'Those who have been born of God do not sin'

### An exploration of the radical statements about sin

The radical references about sinlessness are narrated in two paragraphs, in 3:4–10 and 5:18–20 (cf. also 2:29). These texts occur in contexts where the Elder discusses different issues relating to sin. In 1 John 3:5b, the Elder introduces his thoughts on sinlessness with a presentation of the Son of God as the model of perfect holiness (*ἀμαρτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν*).<sup>10</sup> One of the reasons why *Jesus could abolish sin was because in him there was no sin*. God's opposition to human sin was demonstrated in the appearance of Jesus not only as the Revealer of God (4:5a), but also as the Redeemer of mankind (3:5). Only as the *perfect* offering for sin (cf. 2:2a) could Jesus be the effective Saviour of the world (2:2b; cf. Jn 4:42). This description of Jesus as sinless (cf. also 1 Pt 1:19, 22; 3:18; Heb 8:26) is matched by the Elder's positive assertions that Christ was *δικαίος* (2:1, 29; 3:7), *ἅγιος* (2:20) and *ἄγνος* (3:3). This was the reason why he could free sinners and why those who remain in him will likewise be free from sin (Smalley 1984:157; Malatesta 1978:245). This is also the reason for the exhortation in 2:6, *καθὼς ἔκεῖνος περιεπάτησεν καὶ αὐτὸς [οὕτως] περὶ πατεῖν*. In this context, the sinlessness of Jesus is the proof of the incompatibility between the nature of sin and the nature of the divine (Schnackenburg 1992:172).<sup>11</sup> A logical presumption will be that, if Christ is immune from sin, so too will be the children of God who are united with Him.<sup>12</sup> For the Elder, in the household of God there is no place for sin.

In 3:6, the Elder moves on to discuss the status of the children of God, that *πᾶς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει*. This statement is juxtaposed to the affirmation (about Christ) that *ἀμαρτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν* (3:5). The use of the present participle with the

8. Some tension is evident between the portrayal of God's children as *individuals*, related to God independently through personal faith, and the *corporate* dimension of this relationship to God. 1 John underlines the autonomy of the individual child of God (2:20, 27; 5:20), but qualifies this emphasis with the thematic development of the concept of fellowship with other believers (*κοινωνία* in 1:3; 4:6). These titles echo that experience of 'communion with God' is also corporate and is constituted through relationships with fellow believers in this family.

9. The Fourth Evangelist describes sin in the Fourth Gospel as unbelief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The Elder's understanding of sin is no different from that found in the Fourth Gospel. In 1 John the Elder adds more concepts to the definition of sin, and, thus, defines sin in a broader sense than is found in the Fourth Gospel.

10. (See 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1 Pt 1:19; 2:21–22; cf. Jn 8:46; Heb 7:26; 1 Pt 3:18). Malatesta (1978:244) notices the parallel between verse 5b and the messianic text in T. Jud. 24:1–3, where verse 1 includes the phrase 'no sin shall be found in him'.

11. The Fourth Gospel also refers to the sinlessness of Christ (8:46; cf. 14:31).

12. Cf. John 6:36; 14:9 (in relation to God, 14:7, 9; 3 Jn 11). Physical sight is ruled out with the combination of *ἐγνωκεν*. This experience is not open to all Christians (Schnackenburg 1992:173).





article (ὁ ... μένων),<sup>13</sup> to describe the person abiding, infers the characteristic way of being for that person. The antithetical parallel statement, *πᾶς ὁ ἁμαρτάνων οὐχ ἑώρακεν αὐτός αὐτον οὐδὲ ἔγνωκεν αὐτον*, and the use of the present participle with the article (ὁ ἁμαρτάνων), defines the other group of people. These two constructions imply a state of being rather than an act. This has implications for the understanding of what the Elder intended to communicate in his references to 'sinlessness'. The Elder introduces here two different aspects of the relationship with Christ (Painter 2002:227). He uses this antithesis to point out the radical change which redemption establishes in the believer.

In 3:9, the Elder repeats the statement of *Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ*. However, a new perspective has now been added, which was already adumbrated in 3:8. In 3:8, 9 he develops the impossibility of God's children continuing to sin. In 3:6, the statement of 'sinlessness' is based on when a person abides in God.<sup>14</sup> This person has been born of God (cf. 2:29) and he or she is, therefore, one of God's children (3:1–2). In 3:9, the Elder goes deeper. The existence of the children of God is supernatural, for God's seed abides in them. The sequence has been turned around. It is here, in 3:9, that we read not 'they in Him', but 'He in them'. The metaphor of 'the seed of God' is analogous to 'being born of God' (Schnackenburg 1992:174).

The Elder speaks of God's *σπέρμα* as the agent of the begetting (3:9). The *σπέρμα* is a symbol of the dynamic activity of the word of the gospel.<sup>15</sup> It is the word of God creating new life (cf. Lk 8:11; Jas 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23). The generative *σπέρμα*, which makes believers children of God, is the gospel enlivened by the activity of the Spirit. Through this activity believers became children of God. In the Johannine tradition,<sup>16</sup> word and spirit act alongside one another so that the word is a life-giving word. For the Elder that word is anchored in the foundational message (ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἠκούσατε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, 3: 11; cf. also 1:1; 2:7, 13, 14, 24; 2 Jn 5, 6). The person, *γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ* (who has been begotten of God), therefore, has the *σπέρμα* of God abiding in him. Thus, the explanation moves from *ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ*, to *οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνων* (Painter 2002:229f). The focus moves to the abiding reality of the divine powers to manifest the nature of those who are born of God. The children of God take on the character of God (their Father).

13. The Elder affirms this as a consequence of the fellowship of the believer with Christ (cf. 4:4; 5:3–5). The present tense in this statement is meant to suggest a rule. It seems as if this statement is directed against the opponents of the Elder with their disregard of the divine command. The Elder uses here the perfect tense (ἔγνωκεν) against the slogan of his opponents who claimed to 'have known' Him (cf. 2:13a, 14b).

14. Scholars are not unanimous about to whom the pronoun in the protasis refers: *ἐν αὐτῷ μένων*. In my opinion, it seems, according to the context, to refer to God. In 2:29 and 3:1 the Elder refers to the Father, who seems to be one of the subjects of the periscope (2:29–3:10).

15. Schnackenburg (1992:191) wishes to identify the seed with the Holy Spirit. This is because rebirth corresponds to the prophetic promise of a new heart and a new spirit, but also because rebirth is associated, in primitive Christian tradition, with baptism and the gift of the Spirit (Jn 3:5–7; Tit 3:5). Since the Spirit is an ambiguous witness, it is more likely that the seed is the word which they heard from the beginning (2:24) which, by means of the transitional clause of v. 3:10, is now restated as the 'message which you heard from the beginning' and developed as the commandment of love, in 3:11–18.

16. Also in the Pauline tradition.

The imagery of being 'begotten of God' and 'having the seed of God' abiding in His children is not the only way the Elder deals with this theme. In 3:6 he also describes the same concept in terms of: *πᾶς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει*. In 3:6, the Elder writes about *πᾶς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων* and, in 3:9, about *Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ*. The formal similarity of the beginning of each sentence confirms a parallelism, and duly that *ἐν αὐτῷ μένων* (3:6a) is the equivalent of *ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ*. (3:9a), and *σπέρμα αὐτῷ ἐν αὐτῷ μένει* (3:9b). The fact that this comparison and recognition of equivalence is correct is confirmed by 5:18. The mutual abiding of the Father and His children becomes clear in these overlapping of texts. The children of God abide in Him (3:6) and He abides in them (3:9). This is why His children do not or cannot sin (Painter 2002:230).

However, 5:18 is also a partial parallel with 3:9. The opening, *πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ*, is identical in 3:9 and 5:18. Some variations in wording occur in what follows. In 3:9, the expression is *ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ*, whilst in 5:18 it is *οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει*. The reason for this reference to sinlessness in 3:6 is 'because God's seed abides in them'; in 5:18 a different reason is given. Verse 18 says that 'the one born of God keeps himself ...'<sup>17</sup>

It seems unlikely that this statement should be interpreted literally. 1 John 2:13, 14 reads that the young men have conquered the evil one and the one who believes has conquered the world. The victory comes through the believer's faith, which consists not only of subjective belief but also the content of faith, this being that Jesus is the Son of God (5:4–5). The parallels in John 17 (cf. 17:11, 13, 15)<sup>18</sup> suggest that it is God, and not Jesus, who keeps (protects) the believer, *καὶ ὁ πονηρὸς οὐχ ἄπτεται αὐτοῦ* (5:18). The connection with John 17:15 is close enough to deduce that, somehow, 5:18 means that the Father keeps his children. The verb *ἄπτεται* does not in itself indicate hostility in this context, but instead that 'the Evil One cannot get hold of you' (Painter 2002:324). The children of God, therefore, have no excuse to sin, God will protect them from the evil one or the devil.<sup>19</sup>

The statements about 'sinlessness' and the verification for these statements are, thus, written from different perspectives, and also must be understood from the literary contexts where there are references to *ὁ διάβολος* (*ὁ πονηρὸς*) and *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ*. Over and against the devil, the Elder wants to emphasise the enormous and radical contrast between *τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου* and *τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ*. His association of their sinlessness with that of *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ* is to point out the immense change that took place in their lives when they were born of God.

## Other radical statements in 1 John

Radical statements are part of the style and rhetoric of the Elder. Some of these statements are refutations, directed

17. What is quite interesting here is that these 'sinless' references occur in contexts that also refer to the evil one (3:8–10; 5:18f).

18. See Painter (2002:323f) for a discussion of this.

19. See James 2:12–18 and 4:1–10 regarding the role of selfish desires as a cause of sin.

against the opponents (who are sinning), and others are exhortations directed towards the adherents of the Elder, to keep them on track. Some of his radical statements, which are part of his rhetoric, occur mostly as antithetical language which the Elder uses throughout the Epistle (Tollefson 1999:79–89). For example: τὰ τέκνα θεοῦ versus τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου (2:29–3:10); ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν μένει ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ (3:14); ‘Ὁ λέγων ἐν τῷ φωτὶ εἶναι τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ μισῶν ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ ἐστὶν ἕως ἄρτι (2:9). Other radical statements are, πᾶς ὁ ἀρνούμενος ὃν υἱὸν οὐδὲ τὸν πατέρα ἔχει, ὁ ὁμολογῶν τὸν υἱὸν καὶ τὸν πατέρα ἔχει (2:23), ὁ λέγων ἐν αὐτῷ μένειν ὀφείλει καθὼς ἐκεῖνος περιπάτησεν καὶ αὐτὸς [οὕτως] περιπατεῖν (2:6), and ὁ δεῖ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα (2:17).

The functions of these extreme statements relate to:

- *correcting the false teaching*, by explaining how to become children of God (have fellowship with God) and live a life in accordance with their true faith
- *encouraging* his adherents to the effect that they can be assured that, through their faith in the Son of God (which implies obedience to his commandments), they have eternal life (5:13) and can already experience fellowship with God
- *exhorting* his adherents to turn their back on sin and to take on the character of the Father, namely, to live as Jesus lived (2:6). This means that, through Christ, they have already partaken in the life of God.

## Testing these statements in the rest of the New Testament

To interpret the statements made by the Elder that ‘those who are born of God sin no more or cannot sin’ literally, is incongruous. Such an interpretation is not compatible with the rest of Scripture. The following few examples verify this point of view. In Romans 7:15, Paul is still struggling with sin in his life (‘For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate’). In Ephesians the doctrinal part (chs 1–3), as well as the practical part (chs 4–6), are indications of how the early Christians struggled with wrongdoings. 1 Peter 1:16 also reflects this problem when the author exhorts his reader to a holy way of living (1 Pt 1:16). See also 1 Corinthians 3:1–3; Hebrews 5:11–6:4.

## Conclusion

These radical statements made by the Elder about ἀμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ and οὐχ ἀμαρτάνει are, therefore, an intrinsic part of the Elder’s rhetoric and style. This is to convince his readers (opponents and adherents) just how radical, decisive and final this salvation event was and how different life is in the new virtual Christian family. Life in this family, therefore, necessitates a particular way of conduct which is pregnantly spelled out in the statement Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἀμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ. A more detailed analysis will now be conducted in order to determine why the Elder makes such statements.

## Detailed analysis of the radical statement: ‘Do not or cannot sin’

The Elder substantiates the meaning of this radical statement in his depiction of Christian existence as existence in a family. A dissection of the statement, Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἀμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ (3:6), leads to the following analysis:

- (1) ‘Those who have been born of God ...’ family metaphoric
- (2) ‘... do not sin ...’ ..... salvation
- (3) ‘... sin ...’ ..... sin

The rest of the research will follow this sequence.

## The metaphor of the family

The Elder portrays the Christian life of fellowship,<sup>20</sup> in the Johannine community, as existence in a family (Van der Watt 2000:157, 161–394, 494ff; cf. Rusam 1993:105ff; Van der Merwe 2005:443f.), the *familia Dei*,<sup>21</sup> where God is the Father.<sup>22</sup> Jesus is the only Son (μονογενῆ, 4:9) of the Father and the believers are children of God (τέκνα θεοῦ, 3:1–2, 10; 5:2),<sup>23</sup> with each one having a specific position and function within the family. According to the Elder, it is only here, in this family, where the children of God experience the new life of salvation.

From a patriarchal perspective the Elder depicts *the Father* as the head of the family, the *paterfamilias*. The nature of the Father determines the new status and rules of conduct to which His newborn children must conform. The Elder characterises Him to be light (ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστίν, 1:5), righteous ([ὁ θεὸς] δίκαιός ἐστιν, 2:29) and love (ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν, 4:8, 16).<sup>24</sup> His children, therefore, must take on his character.

Jesus is the only (μονογενῆ, 4:9)<sup>25</sup> ‘Son’ of the Father (Ἰησοῦς ἐστίν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, 4:15). A unique relationship exists between the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. Throughout 1 John Jesus is mentioned in association with the Father, predominantly with the connotation, ‘the Father of Jesus Christ’.<sup>26</sup> In 1 John this title reflects the intimate, indissoluble unity between the Father and the Son (Coetzee 1993:219). When Jesus is referred to as τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ or (μονογενῆ, 4:9) τὸν

20. Alongside ‘to have fellowship with God’, which is only found in 1:3 and 6, one of the most common phrases is e’to be in God’ (ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐσμεν, 2:5; 5:20) or ‘to abide’ (μένειν, 2:6, 24; 3:24; 4:13, 15, 16). This combination with the typical verb μένειν is usually expanded (except in 2:6, 24) into a twofold or reciprocal formula (‘we in God and God in us’). Another expression of fellowship with God, found only in 1 and 2 John, is ‘to have the Father’ (τὸν πατέρα ἔχει) or ‘the Son’ (ὁ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει, 1 Jn 2:23; 5:12; 2 Jn 9). ‘To know the Father’ (ἐγνώκατε τὸν πατέρα) comes down to the same thing (2:3 [cf. 2:5]; 2:13, 14 [cf. 1:3]). Believers are also indicated to be ‘of God’ (ἐστὶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, 3:10; 4:4, 6; 5:18f). God also abides in believers through His Spirit that He has given them (μένει ἐν ἡμῖν, ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος οὗ ἡμῖν ἔδωκεν, 3:24; also 2:3). See also Judith Lieu (1997:31–48).

21. In the Old Testament the term ‘bêth’ or ‘house’, like the word ‘family’ in modern languages, is flexible and may even include the entire nation (‘house of Jacob’ or the ‘house of Israel’), or a considerable section of the people (the ‘house of Joseph’ or the ‘house of Judah’). It may denote kinship in the wide sense (De Vaux 1973:20).

22. τὸν πατέρα, 1 John 1:2, 3; 2:14, 15, 22–25; 3:1.

23. τέκνα θεοῦ, John 1:12; 11:52.

24. According to Culpepper (1995:142) the believer’s ‘fellowship with God’ is constituted, in the light, in truth, in righteousness, and in love, which he calls metaphors for God’s nature. He adds the noun ἡ ἀλήθεια. (5:6) where the Elder refers to ‘the Spirit is the truth’ (τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν ἡ ἀλήθεια).

25. See also John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18, where it refers to the ‘only’ (μονογενῆ) ‘Son’ of the Father (Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, 4:15).

26. 1:2, 3; 2:1, 22–24; 4:14; 2 John 3, 9; cf. also 1 John 1:2; 4:2, 3, 10; 5:10.

υἱόν, it is in close conjunction with the Father (2:23; see also 1:3; 4:14). A repeated parallelism occurs, effectively putting the Father and the Son on an equal level (1:3; 2:23; 4:15; 5:11, 12) (Edwards 1996:160). The close bond between Jesus as Son and God as Father is such that, for the Christian believer, according to the Elder, the experience of one carries with it experience of the other (2:24) (Lieu 1007:72).

In 4:2 there is a direct reference to the 'Spirit of God' (τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ). From 4:13 it is clear that it is this Spirit (of God) which constitutes the presence of the Father (1 Jn 4:13; 3:24) in the family.

The Elder refers to his adherents as 'children of God' (3:1, 2, 10; 5:2). To become *members of this family*, they must be born<sup>27</sup> into this family. They confess that God is 'Father' (πατήρ, 1:2; 2:1, 14–15, 22–24; 3:1; 2 Jn 4) and are referred to by the Elder as 'brothers' (ἀδελφοί and sisters, 3:13) to each other.<sup>28</sup> In 1 John, the followers of the Elder are also repeatedly addressed as 'little children' (τεκνία, 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7), and 'beloved' (ἀδελφοί, 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11; cf. 3 Jn 1, 2, 5, 11).

By referring to this, the Elder brings the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and believers into a fellowship that is similar to that of an extended earthly family (Tollefson 1999:88). It is in this context of the family of God that the statement of πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ, also must be interpreted to make sense.

## Conclusion

The metaphor of the family is part of the Elder's rhetoric and style. This rhetoric is to emphasise the 'virtual family' environment in which the 'children of God' find themselves. The Elder wants to convince his readers (opponents and adherents) that the salvation event is as radical as it is because of what has been accomplished by the various role-players involved in the salvation event. *This phenomenal event the Elder explains further in his multi-dimensional depictions of both sin and salvation in the context of the family.*

## Exploring salvation

### Salvation is a multi-dimensional and corporative event

Salvation is a multi-dimensional event because many entities are differently involved in this one salvific event. Each one has a specific corporative role and function which is clearly spelled out by the Elder. In explaining this, the Elder tries to define the nature of salvation.

The role and function of each entity will now be investigated in order to cast some light on the value of the statement πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ.

27. ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν, 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18; also cf. John 1:12. See also John 3:3–7 and Van der Watt (2000:62, 165–200, 398–400).

28. Believers are also referred to by Jesus as 'sons of light' (νῆοι φωτός, Jn 12:36).

## The Father

God the Father *sends his Son into the world* to give to those who believe in the Son eternal life,<sup>29</sup> enabling them to partake in this new family.<sup>30</sup> The Elder interprets this act, of the sending of Jesus by the Father, from three, closely related and complementary, perspectives. In a comparison of verses 4:9, 10 and 14 it is clear that they are similar in their purport, as, (a) the activity of God described in these contexts, by which his love is manifested, is regarded as salvific in purpose. The Son was 'sent' into the world ἵνα ζήσωμεν δι' αὐτοῦ. (v. 9), as an ἰλασμὸν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν (v. 10), and as σωτήρα τοῦ κόσμου (v. 14), and (b) in each verse it appears that God the Father of Jesus Christ is deeply involved in His created world and has acted in history for the purpose of mankind's salvation (Dodd 1946:110f). *This expresses the 'love and initiative dimensions' in salvation* (4:7–16).

## The Son

The Father's saving act *culminated in Jesus' death*.<sup>31</sup> The Elder argues repeatedly that sin is forgiven through the expiatory sacrifice of Jesus. For him the role of Jesus in the forgiveness of sin is essential, and in 1:7, therefore, he states that τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας.<sup>32</sup> This statement relates to parallel statements in 2:2 and 4:10, where the Elder explains what happened through Jesus's death by insisting that 'he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins' (αὐτὸς [Ἰησοῦς] ἰλασμὸς ἐστὶν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν). Jesus himself is the means by which sins are forgiven (Louw–Nida 1988:504; Klauck 1991:108). The same reality is also expressed in 2:12; 3:5 and 3:16. These passages are sufficient to indicate that the death of Jesus was the atonement for sin and the only way to constitute a new relationship between God and man (cf. Haas, De Jonge & Swellengrebel 1972:36). *This expresses the 'costly dimension' of salvation.*

## The children of God

It is only *through faith* that people can receive God's light of salvation and be born into the family of God. In chapter 5 the Elder develops this theological thought by showing that belief in Jesus, as the Son of God and Christ (5:5–6; cf. 5:10, 13), leads to God's gift of life 'through' him (5:11) and continuously 'in' him (5:12–13; cf. v. 10a). Klauck (1991) states that:

Ein kritisch-scheidendes Moment kommt mit dem Glauben ins Spiel. Der Glaube gibt Antwort auf die vorangehende Liebestat Gottes in Jesus Christus und ermöglicht so die Schaffung eines

29. 1:2; 4:9; cf. also 4:11, 14.

30. Also 1 John 2:25; 3:14–15; 5:11–13; 5:26.

31. Christ is called δίκαιος in 2:1. This predicate (being righteous) heightens the description of his ability to act as the sinner's intercessor. His own righteousness is manifested above all in the righteous act on the cross (cf. 2:2). God (who is himself δίκαιος, 1:9a) can cleanse His children from all unrighteousness (1:9b; cf. Rm 3:26) (Smalley 1984:37f). Salvation from sin, then, is based not only upon the reconciling work of Christ upon the cross, but also upon his exalted status in the presence of God.

32. The blood of Jesus occupies an important place in NT thought, and must be interpreted above all against the specific background of the cultic observances on the Day of Atonement (Lv 16; but cf. also the Passover story and ritual, Ex 12). In his suffering and death, the NT writers claim, Jesus, in perfect obedience, made the true and lasting sacrifice for sin (cf. Rm 3:25; Heb 9:12–14; 10:19–22; Rv 1:5; also 1 Cor 5:7). Therefore, to say here that the blood of Jesus καθαρίζει ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας, means that in the cross of Christ sin is effectively and repeatedly (καθαρίζει, a continuous present) removed (Smalley 1984:25). Eduard Schweizer, (2000:194) adds that the blood of Christ is not only expiatory, but also guarantees God's covenant.



neuen Lebensraums, in dem Liebe alle Relationen beherrscht. Dem Schutz des Glaubens dienen das Bekenntnis und das Zeugnis, gestützt auf die Tradition und ihre geisterfüllte Interpretation. (p. 352)

But the Elder is also aware that the belief of God's children is practical in its *application*. According to the Elder, it is impossible to have true faith (walk in the truth [2 Jn 4; 3 Jn 3, 4]; walk in the light [1:7]; walk according to God's commands [2 Jn 6]; walk as Jesus walked [2:6]; abide in what they heard from the beginning [2:24]; abide in love [4:16]; abide in God [2:28]; etc.) and act wrongly (continue in sin).

Thus, the Elder's use of πιστεύω shows that salvific faith involves full acceptance of the person of Jesus as ὁ Χριστός and ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ, as well as his identity as Saviour. This doctrinal acceptance has the existential ethical implications of refraining from sinful acts. The newborn children of the Father must adapt their lives to the life of his Son (see the καθὼς expression in 2:6) in order to take on his character. *This expresses the 'accountable dimension' of salvation.*

### The Spirit

Two questions that arise are, firstly, How is salvation constituted?, and secondly, How can this new existence be experienced in a concrete way in the family of God? According to the Elder, God now lives with and in his children by way of the Spirit (3:24). The Holy Spirit is the one who applies to God's children the redemptive work of the Father and the Son (2:20). The Spirit becomes the guiding influence in the lives of God's children (2:20–7; 5:7), influencing their conduct. It is the Spirit who influences and leads these children to act rightly (δικαίως 2:29; 3:7, 12; cf. also 3:10), and to walk just as Jesus walked (2:6). The Father takes care of his family through his Spirit. The Spirit will give God's children knowledge (οἶδατε 2:20). Only God's Spirit will guide the believer in the truth (5:6) (Von Wahlde 1990:126ff). *This expresses the 'experiential dimension' of salvation.*

### Conclusion

From the above discussion it becomes apparent that, according to the Elder, salvation is multi-dimensional. Each of these entities in the *familia Dei* has a function in the salvation process. This points is reveal the corporative character of the salvation act. It implies that a child of God needs all the other members of the family to succeed in taking on the character of the Father (which implies no more sin). This multi-dimensional character shows the comprehensiveness and nature of what salvation comprises and, therefore, urges the reader that, *because of this inclusive act, the children of God should sin no more.*

## Salvation implies a continuous forgiveness of sin

### The multi-dimensional nature of sin: Sin inside and sin outside the family<sup>33</sup>

In 5:16, 17 a difficult problem arises when the Elder, in the context of a recommendation to pray for the *sinning brother*,

33. See Van der Merwe (2005:543–570) for a thorough discussion of this topic.

distinguishes between 'sin not unto death' (ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον) and 'sin unto death' (ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον).<sup>34</sup> However, the absence of the article with ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον, and ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον in 5:16f, indicates that the distinction the author has in mind is not between two well-known sins, nor between two definite classes of sin.<sup>35</sup> Instead, the language of 5:16, namely the adverbial use of μὴ πρὸς θάνατον in the phrase τοῖς ἁμαρτάνουσιν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον and the equivalent use of ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον as the accusative of content of ἁμαρτάνοντα,<sup>36</sup> shows that the Elder perceives differences in the quality of sin as such. These are differences regarding the degree to which sin influences 'life' (ζωήν) (Edanad 1987:76).

The reciprocal concept of ζωήν [life] and θάνατον [death], as found in the Epistle, will be the key to the understanding of the concrete nature of ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον and ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον. In this passage, therefore, θάνατον must be understood in the light of the antithetical conception of ζωήν and θάνατον in 1 John,<sup>37</sup> where ζωήν always refers to divine life, which human beings are called to participate in, and is often specified as 'eternal life' (ζωὴ αἰώνιος, cf. 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20). Consequently, the references to θάνατον in 3:14 and 5:16f, as opposed to the ζωήν, can only mean the lack of this divine life.<sup>38</sup> Thus, ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον signifies sin which has, as its natural result, the deficiency of eternal life, and, therefore, implies exclusion from the communion with God, amongst those who are not born of God (5:18), or those who do not believe in the name of the Son of God (5:13) are outside the 'family of God'.

With the exception of three occurrences, ζωήν, as used in the Epistle, is always associated with the Son (1:1, 2; 2:25; 5:11, 12, 13, 20). In the immediate context of 5:16f, eternal life is identified with the Son and its possession is the result of faith in Jesus the Son of God.<sup>39</sup> It can, therefore, be deduced that a total rejection of Christ will cause a total loss of eternal life. In short, ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον, viewed in the light of the Epistle itself, is the violation of the commandment of faith in Christ, in other words, it is a formal or virtual rejection of Christ. Hence, according to the Elder, the ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον is the same as the sin of the ἀντίχριστοι πολλοί<sup>40</sup> and of those who

34. The expression and concept of ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον has parallels in the Old Testament and in Judaism (Edwards 1996:103; Edanad 1987:75), where it means the sin which brings with it, as its consequence, physical death (Nm 18:22), or the sin deserving, or to be punished with death (Dt 22:26; Testiss 7:1; Jub 21:22; 26:34; 33:13, 18; compare Nm 15:30f; Is 22:14; Ps 19:13). See Haas, De Jonge and Swellengrebel (1972:126f) for another translation of these two phrases.

35. When a singular noun is used to signify a class it should be with the article (cf. Blass 1961:252).

36. 'Where the accusative of content is a cognate of the verb, either in etymology or meaning, it serves a purpose only when a qualifying word or phrase, in the form of an attribute, ... is introduced' (Blass 1961:53).

37. θάνατον occurs six times in the Epistle (3:14; 5:16f), whilst ζωήν occurs thirteen times.

38. Edwards (1996:104) refers to it as apostasy, as a deliberate rejection of Christ, once a person has been converted. But this categorising is also applicable to those who reject Christ even after they have heard about him as the only way of salvation according to the Elder.

39. In 5:11f it is explicitly stated that the eternal life granted to men by the Father is in the Son (5:11) and, in 5:12, there is the emphatic tradition: ὁ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει τὴν ζωήν· ὁ μὴ ἔχων τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὴν ζωήν οὐκ ἔχει.

40. 2:18; cf. 2:22f; 3:23f; compare 2:9–11; 3:10; 4:8, 20.

have joined them, excluding themselves from communion with God and with the true believers (Edanad 1987:77f), that is, those inside the family.

The Elder refers to the sin committed by those 'inside the family' as *ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον*, and consequently does not cause the loss of the divine life and complete exclusion from the divine communion (Edanad 1987:75). However, this *ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον* affects the life in the family and disturbs it.

The point the Elder wants to make is that a person who is born of God, into the family of God, cannot continue to live in sin because a new principle of life has been implanted in that person (Strecker 1996:100). There must be an obvious change in the person's conduct. When a child of God follows Christ, he or she will break with his or her sinful past (see 1 Jn 2:29; 3:3, 7, 10; Mt 7:18; Rm 6:7, 12) (Ladd 1998:663).<sup>41</sup> According to the New Testament, being children of God certainly makes a difference in people's attitude towards acts of obedience *versus* acts of disobedience. It involves a reorientation, characterised by an orientation towards God and an orientation away from Satan, the world and selfishness. The actions that result from such an orientation must be interpreted and evaluated in the light of that (re) orientation.<sup>42</sup>

### The multi-dimensional nature of forgiveness<sup>43</sup>

Forgiveness of sin is needed to constitute and experience the existential reality of salvation. In 1 John 1:9, therefore, the Elder states that *ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, πιστὸς ἐστὶν καὶ δίκαιος, ἵνα ἄφῃ ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας καὶ καθάρσῃ ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας*. In the context of the Epistle (1:5–10), the sins from which the children of God are to be purified can only be sins committed after their conversion and incorporation into the family of God (Edanad 1987:88). This statement concerns the necessity of acknowledging one's sins as a consequence of *ἐν τῷ φωτὶ περιπατῶμεν*. In 1:9, the condition of confessing the sins is introduced as antithesis to the denial of a person's sin in 1:8–10, where the Elder directly attacks the position of those outside the family of God. Although 1:8 and 10 attack the refusal to acknowledge sin, in 1:9 the positive request of acknowledgement of sins occurs.<sup>44</sup> This cleansing is dependent on the decision *ἐν τῷ φωτὶ περιπατεῖν*, which means to lead a life according to the self-revelation of God in

41.Cf. Von Wahlde (1990:167ff) for a thorough discussion. Porter (1997:1098) states that, in the argument of the letter, the reality is stated before the ideal. The reality is stated in 1:8–10 and the ideal in 3:6 and 5:18.

42.The above point of view, of a particular orientation to sin, is not peculiar to 1 John. It is a basic Christian doctrine which occurs throughout the NT. See Romans 6 and 8 where Paul's doctrine of sin and salvation is underlined.

43.Here we will concentrate on the forgiveness of sin in the family of God.

44.In this verse the verb *ὁμολογεῖν* is used for the confession of sins. This is the same as the one used for the confession of Jesus as Christ and the Son, in the Johannine letters (1 Jn 2:23; 4:2, 3, 15; 2 Jn 7). Even the use of this verb in the Gospel of John (1:20; 9:22; 12:42) and elsewhere in the New Testament, where the noun *ἔξομολογεῖν* is connected with sin as its object, always signifies public acknowledgement of sin (Mt 3:6; Mk 1:5; Jas 5:16; cf. also Ac 19:18). It is possible that, when the author speaks of a public confession of sins and the consequent forgiveness, the actual situation he has in mind is in the light of the probable Eucharistic context of 1:7 (*κοινωνία*). This is the confession of sins the primitive Christian communities used to make before the celebration of the Eucharist, which Didache 14:1 (compare 4:14) attests to. This is also found in an elementary form in 1 Corinthians 11:28, 31.

Christ as love, which will result in the fraternal communion of believers.

The *Son* ascended to the Father to mediate for the forgiveness of sin. The Elder, recognising that sin is an ever present possibility, even for God's children, encourages them to renounce sin (2:1). In 2:1 he deals positively with the problem of sin: if anyone *should* sin, God has made provision for this, *παράκλητον ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸν δίκαιον*.<sup>45</sup> In the Fourth Gospel the Holy Spirit is said to be sent to Jesus' disciples to be their *paraclete*. But in 1 John Jesus is the *paraclete* for his brothers and sisters, in heaven, in the presence of their Father. Here the word fits the meaning of 'one who appears on another's behalf, mediator, intercessor, helper' (Danker 2000:766), or as Louw and Nida (1988:460; cf. also Smalley 1984:36) define it, 'one who may be called upon to provide help or assistance'. In their need of divine forgiveness, says the Elder, the children of God have an effective intercessor to act on their behalf and to present their case to God the Father (cf. Mt 10:32). As Son, he pleads for the sinner with (*πρὸς*) the Father. This means that Jesus intercedes in the *presence* of the Father. He does so *actively* by (*πρὸς*) the Father, he pleads for the forgiveness of the penitent (the children of God) and will do so until the *parousia*.

Vitrano (1987:129) claims that it can be assumed that, because *τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ* have a *παράκλητος*, their sin is not *πρὸς θάνατον*. In the absence of such a *παράκλητος*, there is no hope. Whilst Christ is the *ἰλασμός* (2:2) for the sins of the whole world, he is the *παράκλητος* for those who believe (who are part of God's family) that he is the Christ (5:1), the Son of God (5:5). Those outside the family, therefore, (*ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου*, 2:16; 4:5; also called *τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου*) are without a *παράκλητος*, they have no advocacy. Consequently their sin is *ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον*, which is further defined in terms of the reciprocals that occur throughout the epistle. This phenomenon could also have been one of the reasons for the Elder's statement that *ὁ ὅ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ*.

The function of the *Father*, in the process of the forgiveness of sins, is that He is the one that, in the end, forgives when it has been confessed to Him. This is the basis of the forgiveness of sin. This is carried out by God (the Father) who is faithful (*πιστός*) and righteous (*δίκαιος*). The metaphor used here for forgiveness is the cancelling of a debt (*ἀφεῖναι*).<sup>46</sup> The aorist tense infers that both *ἄφῃ* and *καθάρσῃ* are viewed as completed actions. The result of such a confession is total forgiveness and total cleansing for that moment of confession.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion

The Elder does not elaborate as much as the Gospel does on the involvement of the Spirit in the salvific process. However,

45.(Gn 18:22–32, comp. v. 19; Pss 34:16; 145:18f; Pr 15:29; 2 Macc 15:12, 14; Ps Sol 6:8; 2 Bar 85:1f; 4 Ezr 7:102ff, 111; also Jn 9:31; Jas 5:16; 1 Pt 3:12). In 1 John *δίκαιος*, as applied to God and to Christ, has a double significance, namely, who one is – one who is just, righteous; what one does – one who justifies the sinner.

46.(See Mt 6:12; 18:27, 32; cf. Ex 32:32; Lv 4:20; 19:22; Nm 14:19). See also the article of Rudolph Bultmann (1979:510).

47.By contrast, in 1:7, the Elder wrote that those who walk in the light *τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρίζει* (present tense) *ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας*. This suggests a process whereby cleansing is going on (Painter 2002:156).



it can be taken for granted (see section 6.1.4) that the Spirit is involved, as the Gospel states it in 16:8 ('And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment'). The involvement of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, as well as the confession of the believer who has sinned, point to the multidimensional character of the salvation process. This teaching on forgiveness confirms the reality of committing sin, even in the family. But once sin has been confessed, the members of this family are no longer accountable for it.

## Salvation is an eschatological event

### Three eschatological texts<sup>48</sup>

The present status of the children of God also has eschatological consequences. The Elder connects the present and the future through three references to Jesus' *parousia* and judgment (2:28; 3:2; 4:17). The 'present eschatological' time will come to an end with the future eschatological event of the *parousia* and *day of judgment*, and will introduce a new 'future or final eschatological' time (Dunn 2003:295). This will be an existence without sin because, according to the Elder, '... we will be like him ...' (ὅμοιοι αὐτῷ ἐσόμεθα, 3:2).<sup>49</sup> This understanding is reflected in the close relationship that exists between verses 2:28; 3:2f and 4:17, which help to explain what the Elder is trying to communicate about this eschatological event. These three verses are related, as indicated by cognate expressions and by the following comparison:<sup>50</sup>

- (2:28) ... ἵνα ἐὰν φανερωθῇ σχῶμεν παρρησίαν καὶ μὴ αἰσχυνοῦμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ  
 (3:2) ..... ὅτι ἐὰν φανερωθῇ, ὅμοιοι αὐτῷ ἐσόμεθα, ὅτι ὁπόμοι αὐτὸν καθὼς ἐστὶν  
 (4:17) ... ἵνα ..... παρρησίαν ἔχωμεν .....  
 ..... ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς κρίσεως

According to this analysis, it is apparent that verses 2:28 and 4:17 form a parallelism, constituted by the phrases *σχῶμεν παρρησίαν* and *παρρησίαν ἔχωμεν*, and the two references concerning Jesus's future appearance, although differently formulated. The phrases *σχῶμεν παρρησίαν* and *παρρησίαν ἔχωμεν* form a chiasm to emphasise the 'confidence' believers can have at the *parousia*. The parallelism also helps to relate the coming of Christ (τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ) with the Day of Judgment (τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς κρίσεως). According to this comparison, the following are deduced, that the event described by the Elder as Jesus's 'revelation' (φανερωθῇ, 2:28; 3:2), is used as a compound word to depict this revelation as Jesus's *parousia* (παρουσία αὐτοῦ, 2:28) and 'the Day of Judgment' (τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς κρίσεως, 4:17).<sup>51</sup> Whereas *parousia*

refers to the future eschatological 'event'<sup>52</sup> as such, the *day of judgment*<sup>53</sup> refers to the nature (purpose) of this event.<sup>54</sup>

In these three texts about the future eschatological events, the Elder also exhorts his adherents to prepare themselves for the *parousia* and the *day of judgment*, and duly that they may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming, and he also exhorts them to become like him, for they will see him as he is. These three exhortations are:

- abide in Christ (μένετε ἐν αὐτῷ, 2:28)
- purify yourselves just as Jesus is pure (ἀγνίζει ἑαυτὸν, καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἀγνός ἐστιν, 3:3)
- and live through love just as Jesus did (ἐν τούτῳ τετελείωται ἡ ἀγάπη μεθ' ἡμῶν, ... καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἐστὶν, 4:17).<sup>55</sup>

These three exhortations relate to the character of God, as depicted by the Elder in 1 John, and are also associated with Jesus, who is the Son of God and the personification of 'divine life' (1:2). The statements, πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει, remind the children of God about these exhortations. A life according to these exhortations would infer a life 'without sin' (οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει). On the day of judgment, faith in him, as the Son of God through whom God became incarnate, and the example of his earthly life to which believers had to conform, will be the measuring stick (καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἐστὶν) according to which people will be judged.

## Conclusion

Jesus is central in this event. His *parousia* will be a day of judgment in which he will be the judge. The 'measuring tape' will be his example on earth. Did the believer live as Jesus lived (2:6; cf. also 3:3; 4:17)? This question becomes a synonym for 'do not sin'.

## Conclusion

One of the leaders of the community, 'the Elder', tries to address the problem of sin with his ideology of fellowship. For him corporate fellowship, amongst believers (created

52. Strecker (1996:79). This thought is in harmony with the early Christian doctrine where *parousia* became a technical term (Mt 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Th 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Th 2:1, 8; 1 Cor 15:23; Jas 5:7, 8; 2 Pt 1:16; 3:4). It occurs only here in the *corpus Johanninum*. It reflects the apocalyptic (future-eschatological) traditions presumed at the Johannine school, without giving any specific time for the coming of Christ (Strecker 1996:79). Schnackenburg (1992:152f) points out that no other term would have been so suitable in a Hellenistic environment to announce the arrival of God as king.

53. Schnackenburg (1992:152). The prospect of 'the day of judgment' (a concept taken from ancient Jewish and Synoptic eschatology) confirms that the Elder is faithful to the eschatology of the early church. (See 1 Enoch 10:4ff; 16:1; 18:11ff; 22:4, 11; 4 Ez 7:33; Jub 5:6ff; 24:28, 30; Pss Sol 15:13; etc.; Mt 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36). Schnackenburg (1992:223) points out that the theology of the early church adheres firmly to this (2 Pt 2:9; 3:7; Jude 6). The Day of Yahweh has often been regarded in the OT as the very heart of the prophetic eschatology (Is 2:12; 13:6, 9; 22:5; 34:8; 58:13; Jr 46:10; Ezk 7:10; 13:5; 30:3; Jl 1:15; 2:1, 11; 3:4; 4:14; Am 5:18–20; Ob 15; Zph 1:7, 8, 14–18; 2:2, 3; Zch 14:1; Ml 4:5) (Von Rad 1977:119).

54. These references to the 'revelation' of Christ show how close the Elder stands, despite his own theology, to the common ideas of the early church, and how harmoniously he has fitted both together. His announcement and explanation of the last hour vibrate with genuine theology, following the general line of early Christian teaching and interpretation (cf. Schnackenburg 1992:153; Strecker 1996:79). Therefore, since no further information is given concerning this event, the rest of the NT is consulted for more detailed information.

55. These three exhortations relate to the depiction of God and Christ to be Light, Righteous and Love.

48. See Van der Merwe (2006:1045–1076, 2008:290–328) on time and eschatology in 1 John.

49. Scholars differ to whom the personal pronoun (αὐτῷ) refers, to God or Jesus.

50. Only the applicable phrases were selected for this comparative analysis.

51. Painter (2002:214) points out that both φανερωθῇ and παρουσία refer to the eschatological future coming, that is implied by the earlier declaration that the ἐσχάτη ὥρα ἐστίν (2:18). This description implies a scene of eschatological judgment.

by living in the light, living in righteousness and loving one another), is imperative for having fellowship with God and his Son (1:3, 6, 7). This can only be achieved through birth into the family of God and consequently to live as Jesus lived, and not to sin anymore. The corporative nature of fellowship and salvation, as existence in the family of God, is defined by the Elder in terms of the family metaphor used by the Elder. Salvation and the success of perseverance, in following Jesus, lie within the family of God. The radical statements regarding 'sinlessness', thus, refer to the nature of sin inside the family. It is sin, but not sin unto death. These statements bring together sin, forgiveness and salvation. Sins confessed are no more imputable. These statements define sin inside the family.

These radical pregnant statements made by the Elder regarding 'Those who have been born of God do not sin' should not be taken or interpreted literally. This is evident when we compare these texts with other texts (1:8, 9; 2:1; 3:4; 5:16) and with the references to forgiveness when believers do sin (1:7–9). It should be understood, as part of Elder's rhetoric, to designate how radical the salvation event is. These radical statements are part of the Elder's literary style, as an exaggeration to express the seriousness and the radical nature of salvation.

Over and against evil the Elder wants to emphasise the enormous and radical contrast between τὰ τέκνα τοῦ δαιμόλου and τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ. His association of their sinlessness, with that of ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, is to point out the immense change that took place in their lives when they were born of God.

This is an exhortation to 'those who have been born of God' to sin no more.

These radical statements are an emphatic call to live as Jesus lived (2:6). It is also said in 3:3, 5 that Jesus was pure (ἐκεῖνος ἄγνος ἔστιν), and that he was without sin (ἁμαρτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστι). Following him will, thus, result in so called 'sinlessness'.

In this research it has become evident that the radical statements made by the Elder are a reflection on the nature of the Christian life, and this involves a way of living expected from the moment of 'birth from God' to the moment of the 'parousia'.

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